

tual tool which could sharpen their inner awareness as well as their awareness of the world around them.

Contemplative life is a life of obedience. However, in "Acting in Freedom and Obedience," Merton clarified the fact that religious obedience is not a question of submission to authority nor is it an instrument for keeping an institution going properly, ". . . [O]bedience is meant to free us so that we can follow the Holy Spirit. We respect the authority of others and obey it, but we also have to follow our own conscience" (229). Religious obedience, Merton believed, "makes a person supple, free from attachments to self-will . . ." (227) which allows a person to live the prophetic vocation of total availability to God.

Merton included other conferences which addressed the topics of asceticism, penance, and celibacy, all of which, for him, conspire to create the contemplative heart: a heart desiring to love God alone, and seeking therein to love all of God's creation.

Thomas Merton's many and varied messages to these contemplative leaders twenty-five years ago prophetically challenge us today. For persons engaged in their own inner process and aware of how that process impacts all of creation, *Springs of Contemplation* will be an asset, an inspiration and a challenge to the journey toward wholeness and prophetic Christian witness in the world.

Denise Levertov. *Evening Train*. New York: New Directions, 1992. 128 pages. \$17.95. *New and Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1992. 266 pages. \$21.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Emily Archer

If there is any poet in these times whose work elucidates "contemplation in a world of action," it is Denise Levertov. "The poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life," wrote Levertov in 1965, exploring the etymology of *contemplation*. Nearly thirty years later, this poet continues to gift us with the in-spirings of her own attention to the world, with poems that emerge awake and breathing. Denise Levertov has two new volumes from New Directions that witness the world

and her service to art. *Evening Train*, Levertov's seventeenth book of poems, attends to the perceived coming and going of Being in mountains, mists, moons, birds, as well as to the anguishing absence of being in the "barbaric fairgrounds" of our own making ("On a Theme by Thomas Merton"). *New and Selected Essays* assembles a mosaic of Levertov's thinking about her vocation and poetics from the 1960s to the 1990s, placing her newest colorations alongside older ones. In these new volumes one can see ever more clearly a "poet in the world" but not of it, and her calling as poet an honor and task she now sees as "work that enfaiths."

True to her publisher's name, Denise Levertov is always exploring "new directions," within and without. *Evening Train* provides passage to a new landscape, the Pacific Northwest. Appropriately, "Settling" is the title of the first poem. However, those familiar with Levertov's themes of pilgrimage, journey, process, and flux will note that the verb is present participle—"settling" not "settled." For while Levertov feels "welcomed here" (Seattle), she says she's come "to live, not to visit." Living means exploring, watching, waiting for being. One subtitle for this book could have been a combination of the first poem title and last—"Settling . . . Suspended"—for the poems that follow the landscape of this new terrain take us with Levertov ever more deeply into the inscape of between. Poised between the quotidian and the numinous, between knowing and unknowing, between faith and doubt, Levertov celebrates the mystery of their minglings with visionary poems that are the fruit of true contemplation.

One special object of contemplation in this new book is a mountain, whose power "lies in the open secret of its remote/apparition" ("Open Secret" 14). Clouds and mists variously illumine the mountain, conceal it, transform it, and float it above the tree line, shaping her faith in the "vast presence, seen or unseen" ("Settling" 3). Thus we find Levertov also settling into a new inscape rich in attention to a presence often experienced as absence, learning from a landscape that still resists humanizing intrusions and scrutiny. Mists in turn rest, rise, veil, efface, and in one poem, transform the mountain, such that

majestic presence become
one cloud among others,
humble vapor, barely discernible,
like the archangel walking
with Tobias on dusty roads ("Effacement" 7).

This mountain rings its changes upon one who has taken a post like the heron to wait for Being, "whatever hunger/sustains his watchfulness" ("Myopic Birdwatcher," 92). The poetry in *Evening Train* is an invitation to ride with an Advent traveller, a watchman who tells us of the night, a psalmist who affirms the possibility of day.

For Denise Levertov, being a poet in the world has always meant being a witness to night and the shadows of our own making. Her "political poetry," despite critical controversy, remains powerful into the 1990s. Part VI, "Witnessing from Afar," delivers up close the continuing horrors of war in all its forms—the Gulf War, AIDS, miseducation, media hypocrisy, technological violence, abuse of earth and human beings—through the transforming power of images that awaken the reader as no documentary realism can. Levertov has "seen a lot" of war over the years as an active protester who travelled to Vietnam. Yet "no knowledge/nor dark imagination/had prepared her" for "the world's raw gash/reopened" in the Gulf War ("Witnessing from Afar the New Escalation of Savage Power," 82). There can be neither peace in the world nor in the cells of our body, her poems convince us, as long as we continue to construct monoliths and systems of our inappetite desires. "In the Land of Shinar," a vivid reworking of Genesis 11, makes the Tower of Babel our own, imagines our lives darkened by the hour in an enlarging eclipse of wisdom. One day, she prophesies, the

weight of dream and weight of will
will collapse, crumble, thunder and fall,
fall upon us, the dwellers in shadow (85).

Poems in part VIII, "The Tide," speak to a different kind of power, being, dwelling. The antithesis to a self-clutching, power-driven existence is modeled by "Christ the Poet, who spoke in images" ("What the Figtree Said," 111). With extraordinary empathy, Levertov imagines the arduous yielding this poet endured in "Ascension," relinquishing the comfortable limits of cells and senses for another kind of birth:

Fathering Himself.
Seed-case
splitting,
He again
Mothering His birth:
torture and bliss (116).

It has been Levertov's recent habit to let poems of spiritual longing and Christian themes occupy the last section of her books. These poems testify to one of her "new affinities of content" (in an essay by that name) and to a faith shaped by its ecstasies, doubts, and incompleteness. There is the growing sense, as well, that in serving her art, Levertov also serves "Christ the Poet," for here is one as willing to speak *Thou* to the lowly, disgusting multipede ("Embracing the Multipede," 107) as to grasp "the rich silk" of God's garment and suffer "no embrace" ("Suspended," 119). Here is a poet as empathic with a fruitless figtree as with Christ stumbling under "Incarnation's heaviest weight . . . this sickened desire to renege" ("Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" 114). Levertov even imagines God's own suffering in one of the most remarkable poems of the book, "On a Theme by Thomas Merton" (based, she notes, on "one of the tapes of informal lectures Merton gave at Gethsemani in the 1960s" [120]). God asks Adam, "Where are you?" and Levertov explores the exile:

God's hands
palpate darkness, the void
that is Adam's inattention,
his confused attention to everything,
impassioned by multiplicity, his despair.

God gropes for a "Fragmented Adam" who dizzies himself at "a barbaric fairgrounds," absent amidst the world's chaos, a black hole in the fabric of creation:

. . . Fragmented,
he is not present to himself. God
suffers the void that is his absence (113).

No false lights or "whirling rides" carry the reader through the objects of attention in this book; rather, the *tenebrae* of faith and memory. The fifth section and metaphoric center of the book, "Evening Train," remembers travellers "gone into the dark" who have shared and shaped Denise Levertov's journey: a dancer, a washer-woman, an uncle, her Welsh mother, her Jewish father. And at their core is "Dream Instruction," a poem dwelling, surely by no accident, at the physical center of the book. There the poet finds herself "in the language-root place," learning not from any human mentor (as she acknowledges H. D., Duncan, Rilke, and Williams to be) but from the

Old Mother, who "has come to live in what happens, not in the telling" (60). Suspended between the rush of past and future, between memory and desire, the poet learns the new direction her vocation must take:

and I have now, as the task before me, to *be*,
to arrive at being,
as she the Old Mother has done
in the root place, the hewn
wooden cave, home
of shadow and flame, of
language, gradual stillness,
blessing (61).

In *New and Selected Essays*, Levertov has collected prose from over thirty years of writing about a servant poetics, a *melos* clearly heard within the constellated themes of this book, within its progression to new tonalities and affinities. Thus, rather than arranging the essays in chronological sequence, Levertov's prose score registers subtle new directions within essays grouped by abiding concerns.

Four essays, for example, show a continued affinity for the work of William Carlos Williams and its implications for her own art. A relatively recent (1989) essay compares Williams's and Eliot's temperaments and approaches to aesthetics. Yet it is also an essay which, while addressing those artists' response to indigenous culture, expresses Levertov's own sense of being always on the circumference of community and place. The English-born Levertov still feels "substantially 'out of sync' with American culture" after four decades and is astonished by what she perceives as America's "constant need for self-definition" (59). That self-conscious sense of place so prevalent and grounding in much American literature may be a deficiency in her own art, she admits, but "it's something which I've had to manage without" (60). The last essay in the book, "An Autobiographical Sketch," explains the early formation of this identity of margins, "unsupported by a community" (258). Yet it may be this very "deficiency" that enables Levertov "to witness from afar" with such clarity, and to greet with empathy those marginal beings who reveal Being in the mysteries of experience.

Denise Levertov has always been at the center, however, of a modern poetics of non-traditional forms and lineation, and her contribution there is widely recognized. Readers familiar with Levertov's

instruction in form and line will be glad to have under one cover "Some Notes on Organic Form," "On the Function of the Line," and "Technique and Tune-up." "Organic form" is a term Levertov used effectively in the late 1960s to image the process of "letting the experience lead [the poet] through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes" (69). In the 1980s, however, Levertov declares the "need for new terms" ("I have almost given up using the word 'organic' since it has been taken up by the shampoo manufacturers" [76]). "Exploratory" now seems to her the best term for a poetics of the inner voice and for a poetry that emerges "vertebrate and cohesive" (77).

Another group of essays deals with such questions as: Who is the poet? What is the poet's responsibility to the world? For over three decades Levertov has stressed the importance of the artist as servant, an attitude she believes keeps the aim of her aesthetics in perspective and the "inessentials" from distracting her attention. Everywhere in her poetry and prose this calling is apparent, but does not go unchallenged. When asked to offer a statement on the relationship of genre to gender at an MLA symposium of women's issues, Levertov stated that the notion that "genre may be determined by gender" is foreign to her aesthetic, that various expressions of gender are made under various sorts of cultural pressures and historical trends. Genre is entirely "a matter of the relation of form to content" (102). And true service to art will transcend "any inessential factor—including gender" so that the work retains "its numinous, mysterious energy and autonomy, its music, its magic" (103). Levertov's own work is testimony to this aesthetic, for one is always aware of a womanly eye in the vision she imparts, but it is finally the vision one remembers.

An early 1980s essay, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," revisits certain questions from "The Poet in the World," the title essay of her most notable prose collection heretofore (*New Directions*, 1973). With two decades of reflection in the interim, Levertov has strengthened her conviction that the poet must be psalmist as well as prophet (another strong melodic line)—praising as well as raging—in order to serve "the trembling web of being" in our age. A poetry of affirmation has as much to do with politics as a poetry of anguish; otherwise, we lose "the vision of the potential for good" and a redemption worth struggling for (144). She poses a related issue in two essays concerned with biography, using the tragic responses to Anne Sexton's life and work

as an example of what must not happen. "Biography and the Poet," the newest essay and previously unpublished, challenges the disturbing trend of misplaced curiosity in literary biography, stimulated in large part by "confessional poetry." A prurient interest in the poet's sexual, medical, or psychological life is bound to obscure the work itself. What, she asks of any poet's biography, will add "valuably to what we receive from the subject's creative opus"? (173). Levertov is looking for biographies like Walter Jackson Bates' *Life of Keats*, for which the poems themselves remain the focus throughout.

Levertov might have had in mind the controversial biography of Anne Sexton by Diane Wood Middlebrook (1991), which contains many transcripts of Sexton's psychiatric sessions. Levertov wrote "Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave" in 1974 shortly after Sexton's suicide-death, deeply concerned over the epidemic tendency she observed to identify the artist's life with self-destruction rather than creation. Anne Sexton's example has been so romanticized and sensationalized that suicide and creativity, depression and poetry are stubbornly linked in the minds of many admirers. Many want to equate Sexton's destructive proverb "'thrust all that life under your tongue!" (192) with artistic activity. But they rarely remember, quotes Levertov from *The Death Notebooks*, that Sexton also wrote

Depression is boring, I think
and I would do better to make
some soup and light up the cave (193).

Thus we have in Denise Levertov an artist who has a clear, yet humble sense of what the world needs from its poets. No less so, Levertov also knows what she as a poet needs from her own kind. By 1992, Levertov's explorations have carried her from a preoccupation with form, terms, and techniques, toward an affinity for content. Her new affinity for content is an important development, as it coincides with the particular "affinities of content" she announces in the book's first essay by that name. "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content," she asserted in 1965 (revising Robert Creeley's projectivist maxim: "Form is never more than an extension of content"). Levertov seems to be journeying further and further toward the often elusive source of that revelation, toward the essence of what *is*—the "I am that I am."

"Some Affinities of Content" is the expressed evidence that Levertov is learning her lesson well from the Old Mother of "Dream

Instruction": she is coming "to live in what happens, not in the telling" (ET 60). Yet this doesn't mean Levertov has abandoned form. Recalling the process of composing *Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus* (*Candles in Babylon*, 1982), Levertov explains coming to the piece at first as an "agnostic" and preoccupied mostly with form, the traditional elements of a Mass. But what happened in the telling was that by the time she arrived at the *Agnus Dei*,

I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem—that long swim through waters of unknown depth—had been also a conversion process, if you will (250).

This is "work that enfaiths," she explains, a bold reversal of the usual "faith that works." Her abiding faith in Keats's "truth of the imagination" has led her to discover analogies "between the journey of art and the journey of faith" (249). Many of Levertov's new directions have come from walking the gift-strewn path of that discovery.

"The poems to which I look for nourishment and stimulus are more and more those with which I feel an affinity that is not necessarily stylistic at all," admits Levertov in the fall 1990 (2). She realized those affinities as being of two sorts, essentially similar in direction: various nature poems of the Pacific Northwest and poems of religious concern. The voices of nature poets Hayden Carruth and Sam Hamill, or the spiritual poems of Czeslaw Milosz and Lucille Clifton provide "testimonies of lived life, which is what writers have a vocation to give, and readers (including those who write) have a need to receive" (21). Levertov's movement toward Christian belief has been consistent and, she states in "A Poet's View," is "not incompatible with my aesthetic nor with my political stance, since as an artist I was already in the service of the transcendent . . ." (243). She has come to live in the happening of her own faith, a process of breathing and becoming, much like the process of writing a poem.

New and Selected Essays is unquestionably a testimony of lived life, still living. But it is to her poetry that one must finally return to explore Denise Levertov's greatest contribution to art. *Evening Train* invites us into a country of diaphanous beauty, where mists shape the sure light of presence. Whirling rides and evening train, the darkness of chaos and the darkness of the divine—Levertov attends it all with

keen night vision. In the re-readings and contemplation her poetry invites, we may get a glimpse also of the language-root place, to a word that enfaiths. It is difficult not to speculate, having read this luminous book, that when God asks Denise Levertov "Where are you?" the answer is "Present."

Jay Tolson. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*.
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. 544 pages. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Patrick F. O'Connell

The name of Walker Percy was connected in my mind with that of Thomas Merton almost from the time of my first acquaintance with each. Sometime in the mid-1960s, I came across one of those magazine surveys in which famous people recommend books they've recently enjoyed. Among the group was Thomas Merton, enthusiastically touting Percy's first novel *The Moviegoer*, a choice which, as I recall, the compiler thought rather racy for a cloistered monk. At the time I had read little or nothing by Merton, though one or two of his books were around the house, and knew of Percy only because the last page of my paperback copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* contained an advertisement for *The Moviegoer*, which did indeed sound rather racy ("a *Catcher in the Rye* for adults only"). It was only years later, after becoming much more familiar with the work of both men, that I realized why Merton was so favorably impressed by Percy, though I continued to wonder how Merton had come across the novel in the first place. That question (along with others of considerably more significance for Percy's life and art) has now been answered by Jay Tolson in his fine life of Walker Percy, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*.

Tolson's biography has a thesis, but is by no means thesis-ridden. In his preface the author says a major focus of this book will be to examine "how, and to what extent, Percy's life constituted a heroic, or at least an exemplary, life" (12). He sees Percy's decision in his early thirties to abandon his medical career (already interrupted by a bout of tuberculosis, contracted in the Bellvue Hospital morgue) and become a writer as a sort of Pascalian gamble: writing provided a way to con-